

Executive Summary 2013

Travis County Children's Protective Services Board

The Travis County Children's Protective Services Board (the Board), created by state statute, is comprised of 15 members appointed by the Travis County Commissioners Court. The four commissioners and the county judge each have three appointments to the Board. The Board's primary function is to evaluate expenditure requests and to direct and oversee the use of an annual budget, allocated from the county's general fund, to be used for children and families involved in the child welfare system in Travis County. Board members, who must be Travis County residents, serve three-year terms and operate under bylaws approved by the Commissioners Court.

The County's Role

When families living in Travis County become involved with the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) child protection program, Child Protective Services (CPS), the county plays an integral role in providing services and funds to the children and DFPS. DFPS and Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service (TCHHSVS) have a contract to facilitate federal reimbursement of the county's general funds expended on behalf of children and families involved in the CPS system. TCHHSVS Office of Children's Services staff and local CPS staff collaborate on initiatives and issues facing children and their families involved with or at risk of becoming involved with the CPS system. CPS staff report to the Board on issues, cases and legislation impacting the agency and the children and families they serve.

The Board's Role

The CPS Board directs budgeted Travis County funds to meet children's needs that exceed or fall outside the parameters of approved services under CPS's budget or other state and federal funding sources. The CPS Board approves county financial assistance to pay for such items as clothing; extraordinary medical, dental, psychological and psychiatric evaluations and services; driver's education; life skills training; ongoing drug testing of parents to ensure compliance with court orders; and educational needs that would not otherwise be available to the children. Providing these goods and services improves outcomes for children and families, and facilitates their movement through the child welfare system toward achieving success.

Child Protective Services

DFPS Region 7 is comprised of 30 contiguous Central Texas counties, of which Travis County is the largest. The local CPS offices have 14 investigation units, six conservatorship units, three Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) units, one drug court unit which has both investigation workers and FBSS workers, and one regional foster and adoptive home development unit. By state statute, once a child comes into CPS care, the case must be resolved within one year. One 6-month extension may be given for cause. Typically a child's case is resolved through (1) returning home (reunification); (2) adoption by a relative; (3) a relative taking permanent custody; (3) adoption by a non-relative; or (4) aging-out from the child welfare system at age 18.

Trends

Significant statewide reforms have focused on keeping children safe in their homes, and improving permanency outcomes for children who are removed. However, due to a number of factors, 2011 saw a significant increase in the numbers of Travis County children in foster care. This increase, combined with budget cuts in the 2011 legislative session which decreased state funding for some services, have contributed to chronic high caseloads and staff turnover rates at CPS.

Travis County engages a number of initiatives to keep families together, provide services and supports that help families heal and grow strong enough to protect their children, and provide child-directed services to children who cannot return home so that they can exit the foster care system with improved chances for long-term success.

The Board actively participates in planning, developing, and monitoring many of these initiatives, some of which are national models. As a result of these programs Travis County has seen significant decreases in the number of children in the permanent care of the state (PMC). Compared to statewide data, Travis County has realized the largest reduction in number of children in PMC in Texas.

The CPS Board Budget

In 2011 the CPS Board's budget from Travis County was \$322,353. Funding requests that fall within pre-approved guidelines are submitted by CPS and processed directly by Travis County staff. Requests that are in excess of or outside the budget guidelines are submitted for the CPS Board's consideration at its monthly meeting.

The CPS Board works with CPS and Travis County staff to approve extraordinary funding requests to address Travis County children's needs. Some examples include: (1) a court-ordered special neuropsychological exam for a child with complex mental health conditions; (2) an educational trip with the class for a foster child who had worked hard and excelled in high school; and (3) a specially-fitted protective helmet to help a young child who has shaken baby syndrome.

A significant demand on the CPS Board budget is the increasing cost of advanced drug-testing techniques used in cases where drug abuse is a contributing factor to child abuse or neglect. The CPS Board historically has approved payment from its budget for testing of parents in CPS cases when other budgets for such testing were exhausted. The development of advanced methods of testing for drugs now more accurately establishes proof of persistent substance abuse, which the Travis County District Attorney's office reports is extremely useful as evidence in court cases to determine whether children can be safely reunified with parents with a history of drug abuse and child abuse or neglect. However, this testing carries a much higher cost, and depleted the CPS Board's 2011 annual budget. Coupled with the increase in children in CPS, the CPS Board expects this expensive budget item will only continue to take a more predominant role in its budget, and has requested that the budget be increased accordingly*.

****Travis County awarded \$50,000 increase for the FY'13 budget year to address these critical needs.***

The CPS Child Welfare Board expresses appreciation for the Travis County's Commissioners Court continued support.